

## **An Overview of the Mill River Greenway**



Prepared by Laurie Sanders, M.S.  
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*Mill River Greenway Overview*

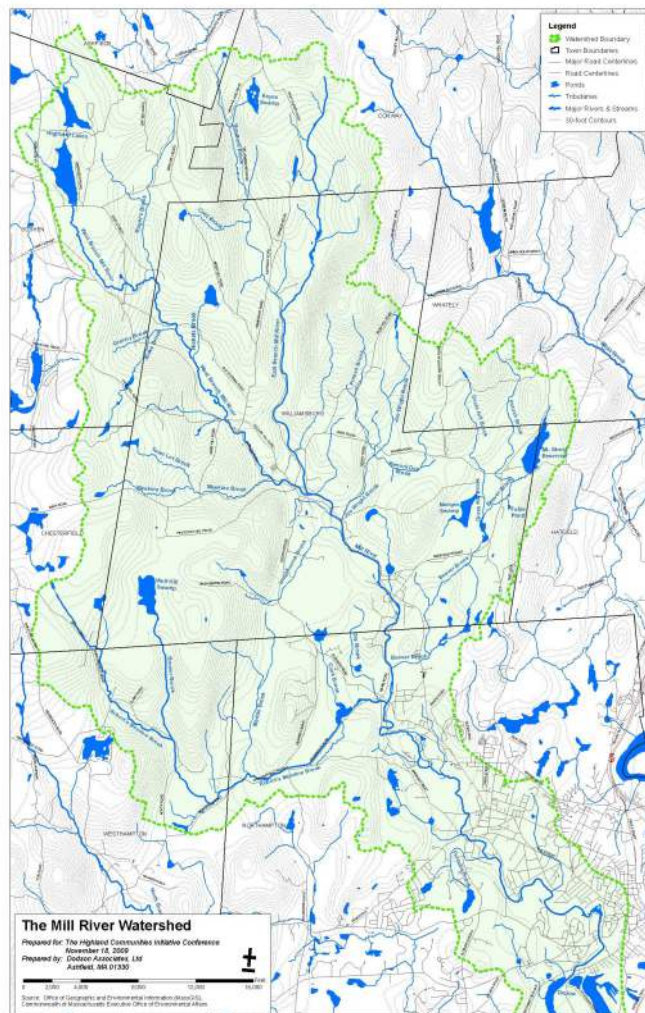
## Mill River Greenway Overview

In 1974, when Northampton's Conservation Commission identified its land protection priorities, it placed the creation of a greenway along the Mill River at the top of the list. Looking back, their decision seems either incredibly idealistic or downright visionary.

At that time, the Mill River was terribly polluted. Mills and homes were still discharging wastes into the river. Road runoff was a problem. But as the Conservation Commission knew, the water quality conditions in the Mill River were improving. Just five years before, the town of Williamsburg had finally stopped discharging its untreated sewage directly into the river and the same year, the burning dump abutting the Mill River near Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary had been closed.

The Conservation Commission expected these trends to continue, and what's more, three good sized properties within the greenway were already protected: Look Park's 157 acres included half a mile along the Mill River, Maines Field in Florence protected another ½ mile stretch and MA Audubon's Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary owned all the land on either side of the Mill River downstream from the Route 10 (South Street) bridge. In addition, the State Hospital and Smith College lands included long stretches along the Mill River and given their ownership, they could be viewed as at least semi-protected.

Today, the original members of the conservation commission have a lot to be proud of. During the last forty years, many more properties along the Mill River greenway have been permanently set aside. The City now owns nine separate conservation areas along the river, all of the fields of the former



From its headwaters at Upper Highland Lake in Goshen (1,440 feet in elevation), the Mill River drops 1,330 feet by the time it reaches the confluence with the Old Oxbow at Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary. Most of that elevation change takes place even before it reaches Williamsburg (530 feet) and, between Haydenville and Arcadia, the total drop in elevation is only 315 feet. Of the river's total 37-mile length, about 10 1/2 miles are within Northampton. *Image courtesy of the Mill River Greenway Initiative.*



The Mill River in Leeds, not far from the border of Haydenville, following a downpour.

State Hospital have been protected through an Agricultural Preservation Restriction, Smith College has placed a portion of its river frontage under private conservation restriction and another landowner has done the same. When all of these “protected” properties are stitched together, the total amount of riverbank protected along the Mill River is about ten miles, or about 50% of the river’s total length in Northampton.

during much of the year, it is now clean enough for swimming and fishing, and the water quality in the lower section of the Mill River is now so good that it supports the highest diversity of freshwater mussel species in the Commonwealth, with 9 of the state’s 12 species, six of which are rare enough to be state and federally listed as either “threatened” or “endangered.” Many other portions of the Mill River greenway fall within the state’s priority habitats for rare species, and portions of the Mill River are, as the Conservation Commission hoped, among the most heavily visited natural areas in the City (*See Table 1 for details*).

But as a “tragedy of the commons,” some sections are now so popular and heavily used that the banks have become badly trampled and eroded. There is also problem with excess dog waste, which has been suggested as the underlying cause of water quality problems and *E.coli* spikes. And even more troubling and harder to solve is the aggressive spread of certain invasive, non-native plants. Some sections of the Mill

And just as the Conservation Commission of 1974 hoped and imagined,



In 1940, the Army Corps of Engineers listed the Mill River as “one of the most polluted in the state.” This view was taken from the Button Mill Conservation Area in Leeds.

River are now among the most severely impacted areas in the entire city, with the most problematic plants species being Japanese knotweed, Asiatic bittersweet, Morrow's honeysuckle, Japanese barberry, garlic mustard, privet, winged euonymus, and glossy buckthorn. These plants not only harm many of the greenway's ecological values, they also reduce its recreational and aesthetic qualities.

As daunting and seemingly overwhelming as the management of invasive plant species may be, there is a new volunteer group called the Mill River Watershed Initiative (MRGI). Led by John Sinton and Gaby Immerman, MRGI focuses on raising awareness about the river's importance (ecologically, historically, recreationally, aesthetically) and working collaboratively. Already they have formed partnerships and alliances with the Town of Williamsburg, City of Northampton, Leeds Civic Association, Smith College and GrowFood Northampton, and have been working on projects ranging from assessing erosion to developing a comprehensive plan to control invasive plants along the river corridor.



*Top:* The Mill River near Maines Field includes a popular, quiet-water swimming hole.

*Middle:* The view across the fields now held by the MA Department of Agricultural Resources and managed by Smith Vocational School. The Yankee Hill Conservation Area is located at the end of the field.

*Bottom:* John Sinton, one of the founders of the Mill River Greenway Initiative, next to his favorite Northampton waterway-the Mill River.

The 2014 ecological assessments of each of the City-owned conservation areas along the Mill River will help inform future stewardship and management efforts.

| Conservation Area Name               | Invasive Plant Species Abundance | Most Problematic                                        | Priority Habitat for Rare Species | Vernal Pool | BioMap Core Habitat | Conservation Assessment Prioritization | Cold Water Fisheries | Trails                           | Parking                           |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Upper Leeds Rail Trail               | Low                              | Japanese knotweed                                       | Yes                               | No          | Yes                 | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes                              | On Street                         |
| Beaver Brook                         | Low                              | Japanese knotweed, Multiflora Rose, Asiatic Bittersweet | Yes                               | Yes         | Yes                 | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes                              | On Street                         |
| Leeds Monument                       | High                             | Multiple                                                | No                                | No          | No                  | No                                     | Yes                  | No                               | On Street                         |
| Button Factory                       | High                             | Multiple                                                | No                                | No          | No                  | No                                     | Yes                  | No                               | On Street                         |
| Florence Meadows                     | High/variable                    | Barberry, Japanese Knotweed, Asiatic Bittersweet        | Yes                               | No          | Yes                 | No                                     | Yes                  | No                               | Designated                        |
| Vistron                              | High                             | Multiple                                                | Yes                               | No          | Yes                 | No                                     | Yes                  | No                               | No Access                         |
| Maines' Field                        | High (along River)               | Japanese Knotweed                                       | Yes                               | No          | Yes                 | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes                              | Designated                        |
| Cutlery                              | Medium                           | Barberry                                                | Yes                               | No          | No                  | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes                              | At Maines Field and walk          |
| Yankee Hill                          | Medium/Low                       | Multiple                                                | No                                | No          | No                  | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes-from Former Hospital Grounds | From Burts Pit Road               |
| Ward Avenue (private CR)             | Medium                           | Winged Euonymus, Japanese Knotweed                      | No                                | No          | No                  | No                                     | Yes                  | Yes                              | From Smith College or Ward Avenue |
| Veteran's Field- Historic Mill River | High                             | Privet, Winter creeper, Japanese Knotweed               | Yes                               | Possible    | Partly              | No                                     | No                   | Yes                              | At Veteran's Field                |

Table 1: Summary of natural invasive species issues, natural resource values and infrastructure for the city-owned conservation areas in the Mill River Greenway.



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